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Research Statement

Inequality is a powerful force shaping social dynamics, conflict, and organizations around the globe. During the last year, the wealth gap in the United States has continued to widen as low-income workers bear the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic through high-risk essential jobs and inequitable vaccine distribution. Moreover, the murder of George Floyd has catapulted racial discrimination to the forefront of America's collective attention. Despite this, employees at organizations like LinkedIn and Cisco have pushed back on policies meant to redress these inequalities, and support for Black Lives Matter has nearly returned to its pre-2020 baseline.

My research seeks to understand the belief systems that inhibit acting to reduce social and economic inequalities. Why do some organizations maintain large wage, gender, and racial disparities even though these disparities harm both the organizations and their employees? The goal of my work is to generate and leverage psychological theories to address these, and other, pressing social problems head on. I pursue this goal by adopting a **multi-method** (e.g., archival data, organizational field data, dyadic network experiments, traditional experiments, and longitudinal studies), **analytically diverse** (e.g., natural language processing, multilevel modeling, item response theory), and **open** (e.g., publicly shared materials, methods, data, and code) approach to conducting rigorous, theoretically grounded science.

In my work I have **(i)** uncovered various biased belief systems (e.g., beliefs about income mobility and poverty) that legitimize damaging inequalities, **(ii)** used these insights to develop and test interventions (e.g., perspective taking, cross-social class contact) to correct these biases, and **(iii)** developed a new methodological approach uncovering areas of bipartisan agreement in addressing poverty and inequality, offering a path towards meaningful bipartisan policy.

I. Belief systems that legitimize inequality

Income mobility. The cultural script of "The American Dream" proclaims that anyone can experience income mobility and rise from rags to riches if they work hard enough. At the core of this dream is the idea that disparities are tolerable precisely because people can move between economic stations, suggesting that inequality is fair and just. However, research shows that upward income mobility is less prevalent than many believe; is the optimistic dream of upward income mobility partially responsible for legitimizing economic inequality? In one of my ongoing lines of research I explore the psychological and organizational consequences of optimistic beliefs about upward income mobility.

On one hand, my research reveals that perceived upward mobility can legitimize inequality at both a national and global scale (Shariff, Wiwad, & Aknin, 2016, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*). Utilizing multilevel modeling to examine International Social Survey Programme data from 40,000 respondents from 34 countries around the globe, I found that people were more tolerant of economic inequality in countries with higher income mobility. However, we know that people hold erroneously optimistic beliefs about their own upward mobility. Thus, to explore the more proximal psychological perceptions of upward mobility, I recruited a nationally representative sample of 521 American adults and experimentally manipulated their perceptions of income mobility in the United States. Consistent with my theorizing, participants who were

led to believe that income mobility was high (versus low) expressed greater tolerance for inequality, and this relationship could be explained by a strengthened belief that unequal outcomes are fair and just. These findings demonstrate that optimistic belief in the American Dream, to some degree, legitimizes damaging inequality.

On the other hand, my research has also revealed that perceived upward mobility can have mixed consequences at the organizational level. Organizations often rely on some degree of pay disparity as a motivational tool incentivizing employees to work harder and attain higher status. I explored whether the perception of upward organizational mobility is a key factor in realizing these potential benefits of organizational pay disparity (Wiwad, Jachimowicz, & Davidai, *Under Review*, *Organization Science*). In a unique dataset of over 2,000 employees obtained from a large financial services company, I found that employees who saw themselves as more likely to move up the organizational ladder were less likely to want to leave the organization and find another job. In this dataset, and in five additional experiments (n = 5,234), I found consistent evidence that this is in part due to a dampened belief that success in one's organization is zero-sum as well as higher quality relationships with one's managers.

Despite this, in these experiments I find that employees who view their organization as more upwardly mobile are more tolerant of high CEO-to-median worker pay ratios. This research demonstrates that while upward mobility has positive consequences in the short term (e.g., better relationships, reduced selfish and competitive implications of zero-sum thinking), it serves to exacerbate organization inequalities, and their downstream consequences, in the long run.

Poverty. The above work demonstrates that optimistic beliefs about *organizational and societal* processes—one's ability to move up the social ladder—can legitimize inequality. But what about beliefs regarding the *psychological* processes surrounding beliefs about people who inhabit the lowest rungs of this social ladder? In my dissertation work I explored whether attributions for poverty—judgments about why the poor are poor—serve as a pernicious belief that legitimizes damaging levels of inequality (Piff[*] & Wiwad[*] et al., 2020, *Nature Human Behavior*; Wiwad et al., 2021, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Wiwad & Stephens, *In Prep*).

I explored these beliefs using a mixture of cross-national archival data, laboratory experiments, and large nationally representative samples (Piff[*] & Wiwad[*] et al., 2020, *Nature Human Behavior*). First, analyzing 34,000 respondents across 19 countries from the World Values Survey, I found that people in countries with a stronger recognition of the societal barriers to escaping poverty (versus a stronger belief that the poor are lazy) demonstrated lower tolerance for inequality. These findings held in a pre-registered replication amongst a large (n = 632) nationally representative sample of American adults. Next, to rule out alternative explanations I conducted a series of experiments. In one such experiment I found that when I prompted people to briefly write about the situational causes of poverty they were more egalitarian, donating 31% more of a windfall endowment to a charity whose mission is to reduce inequality by fighting poverty. These findings offer initial evidence that beliefs about poverty, specifically the recognition of situational barriers to escaping poverty drive tolerance for inequality and egalitarianism both globally and within the United States.

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[*] Indicates co-first authorship

Critically, the Coronavirus pandemic has served as a highly visible situational cause of poverty and inequality; many people are experiencing this type of uncontrollable financial strain for the first time and the media has extensively covered the impact of the pandemic on both poverty and inequality. I took this rare opportunity to test my theory that increased awareness of the situational causes of poverty decreases tolerance for inequality in a naturally occurring context. I conducted a longitudinal study spanning one year to test this prediction (Wiwad et al., 2021, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*). Using a series of latent growth curve models, I found that people who were more aware that the Coronavirus pandemic unduly impacted the poor displayed greater increases in situational attributions for poverty and opposition to inequality between April 2019 and May 2020. This attitude change in turn predicted a higher willingness to help the poor. While the Coronavirus pandemic will likely continue to exacerbate already record-setting inequalities, it may also mobilize organizations and individuals who recognize this to help society's most economically vulnerable.

My research thus far finds two belief systems, about the ability to climb the social ladder and the causes of poverty, can legitimize damaging levels of economic inequality at levels ranging from organizationally to globally. Critically, my work also suggests that these beliefs are malleable and thus offer promising routes to developing interventions that can increase concern about economic inequality and lead to more equitable economic outcomes.

II. Interventions to increase concern about inequality and foster egalitarianism

In the second focus of my research, I aim to understand exactly how we can effectively counteract the negative consequences of various inequalities. Thus far, I have used poverty simulations, dyadic laboratory experiments, and longitudinal methods to test whether shifting attributions for poverty is a viable route to tackling rising economic inequality inside and outside the lab.

Perspective taking. Extending upon the idea that people are less tolerant of economic inequality when they recognize the systemic causes (e.g., educational and labor market barriers) of poverty, I explored whether a "low-touch" intervention that simulates the daily struggles of poverty could result in meaningful and long-lasting attitude change (Piff* & Wiwad* et al., 2020, *Nature Human Behavior*). In one such experiment I randomly assigned participants to either engage in a short, but impactful, poverty simulation called SPENT (available HERE[1]) where they made a series of daily financial decisions as if they were living in poverty. Compared to a no-simulation control condition, I found that participants who played SPENT were not only more cognizant of the systemic barriers that sustain poverty but also, as a result, expressed greater concern for economic inequality and support for redistribution. Crucially, this difference persisted outside of the lab both one day post-intervention as well as *five months later*. These findings are consistent with evidence that macro-level institutional factors (e.g., attending multi-year college programs that facilitate living in poverty-stricken areas) can shape concerns about the poor and economic inequality. However, these interventions typically entail wide-scale and costly institutional coordination. My work demonstrates that low-touch interventions highlighting the salience of situational causes of poverty can promote action aimed at attenuating high levels of inequality.

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[1] playspent.org

Cross-social class contact. Intergroup Contact Theory demonstrates that, under the right circumstances, cross group contact can reduce prejudice. In some of my dissertation work I applied this theory to a previously unexplored context—social class. In two intensive dyadic laboratory experiments I found that participants who engaged in a cross-social class (versus same social class) interaction were more egalitarian in a one-shot dictator game. I have continued this line of work to explore the linguistic elements underlying attitude and behavior change in this context (Wiwad & Stephens, *In Prep*). I am recruiting pairs of middle- and working-class individuals to converse online and, through this design, am generating a rich source of data not typically analyzed in cross-group contact research—the conversations themselves.

Using natural language processing analyses and economic games, I have found initial evidence that syntactic matching (i.e., similarity in how people speak) is related to reduced prejudice towards the poor, stronger recognition of social barriers that cause various (e.g., education) inequalities, as well as increased cooperation. Moreover, I find initial evidence that working class participants change their syntax more over the course of a conversation to align with their middle-class conversation partner. This research lays the groundwork for my future work designing cross-social class contact interventions that can amplify the effective, and downplay the ineffective, linguistic features of productive attitude and behavior change.

III. A new typology of socioeconomic priorities

When designing social policy, scientists and policymakers alike debate whether poverty or inequality is the more pressing concern. In my recent work I have developed a novel typology to test how, independently and jointly, concerns about inequality, economic efficiency, poverty, and wealth influence policy support (Wiwad, Shariff, & Kteily, *Under Review*, *PNAS*). With this research I have created a theoretical and empirical lens through which I explore the delicate balance, and boundary conditions, between these sometimes-conflicting motives in various intergroup contexts. Counter to existing narratives on political polarization, my findings reveal a large degree of partisan overlap; Republicans and Democrats alike strongly prioritize helping the poor and share a general dislike of helping the rich. However, Democrats are secondarily more concerned with reducing inequality (with no special concern given to how the rich are affected). Republicans, on the other hand, are more concerned with protecting the wealthy (with little special concern given to decreasing or increasing inequality). By leveraging this comprehensive typology framework, I can generate valuable insights for designing social policy at the intersection of bipartisan economic priorities. I am greatly looking forward to continuing this line of research.

IV. Conclusion

Economic inequality has been rising for nearly five decades and has begun to reach unprecedented levels that negatively impact both organizations and society more broadly. In this statement I have outlined my cumulative research agenda that seeks to create a comprehensive understanding of the psychology of economic inequality. My research utilizes diverse methods, as well as cutting-edge methodological and statistical techniques, to achieve this goal. With this research I aim to benefit organizations and society broadly by (i) building a comprehensive theoretical understanding of when and why we come to believe that high degrees of inequality are acceptable and (ii) informing and creating interventions that legitimize and foster equitable, as opposed to unequal, economic outcomes.